



What Do Symptoms Mean to The Chiropractor?

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To clarify misconceptions surrounding the writings of DD Palmer, BJ Palmer, and Ralph Stephenson concerning patient's symptoms and to describe the importance of understanding the patient's presentation in chiropractic care.

Discussion: The founders of the chiropractic wrote extensively about the need to understand the patient's symptomatic presentation. From this information the chiropractor understands the patient has lost the ability to properly adapt to the internal and external environment. The philosophical basis of chiropractic is that the body is self-regulating and self-maintaining, directed by a vitalistic force called Innate Intelligence. Lack of ability to adapt to the internal and external environment results in dysfunction. Therefore, if a person demonstrates physical signs and symptoms, it is due to lack of ability of Innate Intelligence to maintain the body in health. The founders of the profession believed that a patient's symptomology is an important indicator of the need for chiropractic care, though not the focus of that care.

Conclusion: To function in the present day health care world, it is essential for the doctor of chiropractic to understand the status of his patient's health, how it relates to the care he renders, and just what care he is rendering. The chiropractic model of health acknowledges the importance of understanding a patient's symptoms. What makes chiropractic unique is the meaning ascribed to the patient's symptomology, essentially, that the patient has lost the ability to self regulate body physiology. (J Chiropr Humanit 2006;13:27-9)

Key Indexing Terms: Chiropractic; Symptoms; Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

As I arrived in my neurological diagnosis lecture, I noticed a stack of the January 2006 edition of *The Pivot Review*. Contained therein is an article by Dr. Strauss entitled "What's So Bad About Discussing Symptoms?"¹ The main point appears to be

that chiropractors have no need to discuss patients' symptoms. Furthermore, the author declared, to do so represents a misunderstanding of the basis of chiropractic care. This statement demonstrates a lack of understanding of the principles upon which chiropractic was founded. The purpose of this article is to clarify misconceptions surrounding the writings of DD Palmer, BJ Palmer, and Ralph Stephenson concerning patient's symptoms and to describe the importance of

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understanding the patient's presentation in chiropractic care.

DISCUSSION

Concepts of Patient Health

The first misconception presented by Dr. Strauss is that there is such a thing as a medical condition, which may or may not improve under chiropractic care. There is none, nor is there a chiropractic condition, there is only the *patient’s health status*. As such, a doctor, no matter what the specialty, or philosophical bias, should be concerned first and foremost with the status of his patient’s health.

The philosophy of chiropractic developed from a vitalistic movement that swept the American Midwest during the mid to late 1800’s. Vitalism, labeled *Innate Intelligence*, by DD Palmer is still evident in modern practice.^{2,3} The function ascribed to Innate Intelligence is to maintain the health of the body. Stephenson wrote,^{4(p.xxxii)} “The mission of Innate Intelligence is to maintain the material of the body of a “living thing” in active organization.” In one word - health.

The nervous system conducts, adapts, and coordinates the forces of Innate Intelligence within the body for restoration and maintenance of health.^{4(p.xxxviii)} Interference with this function of the nervous system is the cornerstone of both the philosophy, and the practice of chiropractic. Stephenson wrote,^{4(p.xxxviii)} “Interference with the transmission of Innate forces causes incoordination of dis-ease.” He further states that the inability to adapt, resulting from dis-ease leads to pathological changes.^{4(p.209)} Therefore, if a person demonstrates physical signs and symptoms, it is due to lack of

ability of Innate Intelligence to maintain the body in health.

The patient's symptoms are simply signals within the distinctive, vitalistic, chiropractic model of health that lead a doctor to find the cause. A doctor should be able to evaluate his patient and make a determination as to the nature of the patient’s symptoms. BJ Palmer wrote,^{5(p.396)} “Subluxations could, would, and often do interfere with one or more or any combination of functions expressed in this organ (the spleen).” Symptoms provide information that should lead the doctor of chiropractic to the location of the interference.

Traditional Attitudes

Frequently, and erroneously, chiropractors claim the philosophy of chiropractic dictates ignoring their patient’s health status beyond the adjustment. This is not the traditional attitude of the founders of the profession. DD Palmer believed that the patient’s presentation, and history of symptoms, was integral in the rendering of chiropractic care. In fact, he wrote,⁶ “A student [and presumably a graduate] learns the history of the case from symptoms and outward signs. From these symptoms and outward signs, he constructs his diagnosis, locates the region where the lesion exists.” Furthermore, BJ Palmer wrote,^{5(p.71)} “As you approach your patient you get a picture in your mind of what he is; as you listen to his symptoms you get a mental picture of the places causing them.”

In addition, Stephenson wrote,^{4(p.346)} “It is well to write down the history and symptoms on your analysis card or in your analysis book.” He also wrote,^{4(p.345)} “Question your patient closely for

information concerning his case. Get the history of the case and all the present symptoms.” It is clear from the writings of the founders, that the doctor should understand the nature of the patient’s symptoms as a part of caring for the patient.

Current Standards

The Council on Chiropractic Practice makes the following recommendation regarding case history:⁷ A thorough case history should precede the initiation of chiropractic care. The elements of this history should include general information, reason for seeking chiropractic care, onset and duration of any symptomatic problem, family history, past health history, occupational history, and social history.

It is well documented by the founders of chiropractic that chiropractic is not a system which directly addresses or seeks directly to relieve symptoms, instead, the focus of the chiropractic profession, and the chiropractic adjustment, is directed to vertebral subluxation as the cause of the symptoms. DD Palmer wrote,⁸ “We do not treat disease or its symptoms; we adjust causes.” BJ wrote,⁹ “Because the usual adaptative symptoms and pathologies are more noticeable, prominent, obvious, and objective than the dis-ease from which they have their origin, why diagnose and treat them?” With the same emphasis, the Palmers recognized the need to record and use the patient’s presenting symptoms in the clinical setting to help determine how best to care for the patient, and how well the patient responds to chiropractic care.

CONCLUSION

To function in the present day health care world, it is essential for the doctor of chiropractic to understand the status of his

patient’s health, how it relates to the care he renders, and just what care he is rendering. The chiropractic model of health does, in fact acknowledge the importance of understanding a patient’s symptoms. The lack of coordination and health causing the symptomatic presentation is the evidence of interference with the nervous system’s ability to conduct the restorative and adaptive forces of Innate Intelligence.

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